After gaining independence and after the civil war of 1992-1997, the socio-economic situation in Tajikistan has significantly deteriorated and, above all, it affected the sphere of education, science and culture. The reduced level of education significantly affected the entire population of the republic, and now it bothers everyone, from government officials to ordinary citizens, writes Humayro Bakhtiyor, journalist (Dushanbe, Tajikistan), in her article written exclusively for cabar.asia

Numerous articles in the media and complaints of citizens indicate that a whole range of problems lies in the field of education. And if they are not solved in the near future, Tajikistan may face many problems and, above all, the slowdown in many sectors of the national economy. Already, Tajikistan is experiencing a surplus in labor personnel, has a huge number of its citizens in labor migration and is faced with the fact that its citizens are accused of low qualification and doing only menial work in the host countries.

In Soviet times, teachers and professors were among the most respected people in Tajikistan. Working in this area was prestigious, because peaceful future required only one thing – receiving good education. And it should be noted that the level of education was high enough in the country. Until now, people who have graduated from schools and universities in the Soviet times are considered good professionals and highly valued.

But over the years, receiving a good education has become difficult. If in Soviet times, only one thing was required from the younger generation – to study well, today these requirements have changed. Now, administrations of schools and universities demand from students and pupils everything but the quality of learning: with special attention to appearance, ranging from the size of heels and backpacks, to the length of skirts and beards.

Government officials from relevant ministries and departments, knowing that the level of education in the country has dropped significantly, are looking for the ways out of this situation. However, reforms in education must be started from changing the management system in this field. Among the main reasons for the sharp decline in the level of education, experts call corruption, low wages and prestige of the teaching profession, the lack of professional staff and the lack of modern curricula and textbooks.

Shortage of teachers and trainers

Reforms in the education sector, like in other sectors, had begun in modern Tajikistan in
around 2000. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war delayed many good intentions and above all, exacerbated the personnel problem in all spheres, including in education. Many schools remained without teachers, some of whom left the country, while the others began to sell things at “flea markets” because of low wages at schools.

The republic’s government has made many steps to bring teachers back to schools and universities; however, the problem of shortage of teachers is not completely solved. According to official figures, more than 10 thousand teachers were still highly demanded in the country in 2005. In order to somehow improve the situation, high school students were invited to teach younger students at schools. This, of course, was not an option, so later, the Ministry of Education decided to oblige all graduates of pedagogical universities to work at schools during at least three years after graduation. Otherwise, the government threatened to prosecute those who do not work as schoolteachers after graduation and make them reimburse all the money the government spent for their university education. Local media covered several of these scandalous cases.

To date, the Ministry of Education announced that this problem has been completely solved, and there is no shortage of teachers. But polls show that this is not true. Directors of many schools in the capital have complained for the lack of personnel, and they have to ask teachers to teach several subjects. So the teachers of the native language and literature can also teach history, geography or physical education. In remote areas and villages, the situation is even worse. There’s huge lack of subject teachers in mathematics, computer science, chemistry, physics, foreign languages, etc.

The reason lies in the prestige of the teaching profession and low salaries of teachers in public schools.

Low wages of teachers

The minimum wage in Tajikistan is 400 somoni ($58). The salary of teachers depends on the category, total experience, rates and additional duties. According to rough estimates, the salary of teachers in public schools does not exceed $ 150 per month. Salaries of university teachers are slightly higher and reach $ 200.

It should be noted that families in Tajikistan have many children, and the unemployment rate is quite high. Often in families with four, five or even more people, there is only one breadwinner, and it is almost impossible to survive. Older teachers say that they used to prepare for each lesson during several hours, but today few of the teachers do so, because in order to survive and feed their families, they have to work in several places.
“And teachers themselves are morally “outdated” and always tired because of hard life in rural settings. They have no time to study. In the fall, they have to take care of harvest, and in the spring, they have to sow. They have to get up at five in the morning. We have only twenty-three teachers of subjects”, writes Saifullo Musoev in his article “Money and connections - a win-win combination in Tajikistan”.

The Ministry of Education and Science is working on this issue. According to official data provided, teachers’ salaries rose by 30 percent in 2010. But we must take into account the fact that the price for food, for example, has increased by more than 55% over the past five years.

Corruption

However, the biggest problem for the Tajik education system is the high level of corruption, which starts from kindergartens and accompanies citizens in higher educational institutions.

In accordance with the Constitution, citizens of Tajikistan have the right to free education. However, no one pays any attention to this article of the Constitution, because it is virtually impossible to receive free education in the Republic of Tajikistan.

The problems begin for parents from the time when they want to find a school or daycare for their children. Population growth in the postwar years (according to official data, the population of Tajikistan was 5 million in 1990, and more than 8 million - in 2014) has led to the fact that every year, the number of students increases, and but there are not enough schools, in spite of the efforts of the government. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, 1,742,815 students studied in 3,845 secondary schools in 2014-2015 academic year.

The situation with kindergartens and nurseries is even worse. They are sorely lacking. Therefore, in order to have their children attend a daycare, parents are ready to meet the requirements of heads of kindergartens, who either ask to provide some services, or to pay some money. Typically, rates depend on the prestige of the institution and of its location.

One of the parents, who wanted his child to attend one of the schools in the capital said (on condition of anonymity) that the director of the school asked him to pay $ 500. The parent got angry, he did not understand why he should pay such a sum. So he wrote a complaint to the Ministry of Education, in response to which an official from the Ministry said that $ 500 was a normal rate, that in his experience, there had been cases when parents were demanded to pay $ 1,500.
Another problem in schools is informal fees, such as paying for “month”, “for new curtains”, for “holiday”, “for stationeries”, for “chalk”, “for repairs”, etc. According to average estimates of parents, a parent has to spend up to 500 somoni ($ 72) for one child per year in “free” public schools. As mentioned above, there are large families in Tajikistan, and often these sums are multiplied by three or four times, depending on the number of children.

The state is struggling with this problem, but the effectiveness of this fight causes doubt. Last year, the Agency for fight against corruption raided in many schools, in order to curb corruption. However, it seems that schools knew in advance about the arrival of people from the anti-corruption agency, and many of them asked students to bring refreshments for the “Commission”. In addition, before the arrival of the agency, teachers forbade students to say anything about fees and threatened them with bad consequences in the form of bad grades.

The situation is even worse in the universities of the country. “Rates” for admission there is many times higher, and that has caused some scandals. Bribes for admission to universities and colleges start from $ 2 thousand and finish with $ 15 thousand. The most expensive and prestigious are law schools, Faculty of International Relations and medical schools. In 2014-2015, 167,660 students studied in 38 universities of the country.

During the last two years, the Ministry of Education and Science, in an attempt to root out corruption, has introduced a unified system of testing. However, this measure does not solve the problem of corruption. Last year, after the announcement of the test results, there were massive complaints of irregularities in the testing system. According to the complaining citizens, the Commission made mistakes; there were cases when some points were written off in favor of other students. Judging by the stories of the victims, as a result, many applicants, who had good connections and money, became students of universities.

In addition, there are rates for obtaining credits. Generally, students show little eagerness to learn, but they are not afraid to be expelled, because they expect that they will be able to “buy” credits.

One of the experts in the field of private education, Farkhod Kayumov (name changed) said that when they invited teachers from several universities of the country to work in the private school, many of them refused, saying that they are satisfied with $ 200 that they earn at public universities, although private schools offered them a salary up to $ 1,000. This fact indicates that teachers have under-the-counter earnings, said Kayumov.

Outdated curricula
Another acute problem for Tajik education is outdated curricula and tutorials.

The Ministry managed to solve the problem of shortage of textbooks, but the content of these textbooks receives much criticism of experts, who note many mistakes. Professor Ibrahim Usmanov said that for 20 years, the majority of Tajik students learn from translated textbooks or books from other countries. If textbooks on non-humanities or fundamental sciences should correspond to the level of intelligence of students, the humanities must be written on the basis of reliable sources of our own history, literature and culture.

In the cities, the situation with teaching aids, curricula and textbooks is a little better because modern conditions of life, the internet and communications help teachers and students to keep up with the times and get more knowledge. But in rural schools, it is even poor, there is no money for textbooks, there is no electricity for learning on computers, schools do not have enough teachers, so graduates of rural schools are uncompetitive not only to continue their studies in other countries, but even for universities of their own country. That’s why most of the villagers leave for labor migration immediately after training in schools, where they do the most menial jobs.

Most teaching programs used in schools and universities were developed during the Soviet years. Despite the fact that the education system in the USSR was one of the best in the world, methods are obsolete.

Sharifmurod Isrofilniyo, director of the Institute of Development Studies of the Ministry of Education, says that because of the civil war, the education system in the country has fallen 50 years behind. It is reported that the Ministry of Education and Science and the Institute are not satisfied with the level of knowledge of school students and even teachers. Therefore, experts of the Institute are developing textbooks for secondary schools and high schools.

Appearance matters, not knowledge

Analyzing the quality of education in Tajikistan, we should not omit one of the specific parts of the educational process, in which the Ministry has succeeded. This is a desire of managers of the education system to refine the appearance of pupils and students, and even of teachers.

Since 2005, the Ministry has issued some instructions and recommendation brochures for schools and universities, according to which boys are banned from wearing T-shirts and jeans in the classroom, they must wear shirts and ties, in addition, a kind of “commission” in
schools and universities is rigidly controlling the appearance of the boys without schoolbags. Girls are forbidden to appear in tight clothes and short skirts, as well as in colorful or glazy dresses, shirts of skirts. It is also forbidden to wear the hijab, religious headwear for Muslim women. Wearing jeans, running shoes and gym shoes for girls is also forbidden. And, although the booklets of the Ministry of Education are advisory in nature, school girls and boys were forced to strictly comply with these instructions. There used to times, when at the gates of schools and universities, there were people on duty, who observed the appearance of students, and in case of no coincidence with the pictures in the brochures, they simply did not allow them to enter the territory of schools and universities.

These “recommendations” were made for teachers, too. Teachers in all schools are forbidden to come in the national footwear – frogshoes and galoshes “Irinka”. Jeans and sneakers are also subjected to ban, teachers were forbidden to deliver lectures with gold teeth, wearing gold jewelry. Men are forbidden to wear a beard. Later, the Ministry of Education has changed a bit this recommendation and allowed men over 50 years old to wear a beard no more than 3 cm long.

Several years ago, many schools have introduced school uniform for girls and boys, and parents had to buy it only in schools, and this uniform was produced only at certain garment factories. It was not allowed to wear school clothes bought elsewhere. Parents have repeatedly complained that such school clothing was of bad quality, it was of synthetic fabric and much more expensive than the school cloth sold in the markets.

There were a lot such initiatives by the Ministry of Education and Science, for which it was repeatedly subjected to harsh criticism in the local media. According to many citizens, the leadership of the Ministry pays too much attention to the external attributes of the educational process, neglecting the quality of teaching and knowledge of the younger generation of Tajikistan.

The successes and shortcomings of the public education system

It would be unfair to say that the Ministry of Education of Tajikistan does nothing to improve the level of knowledge. The system has been reformed for about 20 years. The Ministry of Education of Tajikistan is doing much to bring back its former status in terms of education, because in the Soviet era, the system of education in the country was one of the best.

Thus, by the resolution of the government, all schools, even in remote rural areas and villages, were equipped with computers and other modern office equipment. However, in
many schools, these computers are idle, because most areas and villages receive uninterrupted electricity only in the summertime, when most students are on vacation. Every year, during the winter period, from October to March, electricity is given in the districts and villages for no more than 10 hours a day.

In 2010, the Parliament adopted amendments to the law “On education”, according to which it was assumed that Tajikistan will switch to 12-year system of schooling. According to the Ministry, the World Bank provided $ 20 million for this purpose, and the German Development Bank – 13 million euros as grants. The transition was planned to begin in 2011 and be completed by 2017. However, this transition has not begun yet, and it is unclear when it will start, as the technical basis of the majority of secondary schools is not ready for this.

In the same year, the Ministry of Education of Tajikistan closed all correspondence education departments in the country’s universities. According to the ex-minister, Abdujabbor Rakhmonov, the level of knowledge of graduates of the correspondence departments did not meet the standards. As a result, working young people have been deprived of an opportunity to improve their level of education without quitting jobs.

The initiative of universal basic secondary education was successful. Now public officials in the field of education strictly monitor the situation to ensure that schoolchildren and, in particular, schoolgirls, finish at least 9 years of school education. The problem of girls’ education in Tajikistan was especially acute in post-Soviet years, during and after the Civil War, when many parents felt that girls did not need education, that it was enough for girls to learn how to keep household and please their husbands and parents-in-law. Especially acute this problem was in villages. And we should recognize that the government was successful to bring girls back to school. There have been several cases when parents, mostly fathers, were brought to justice because they did not let their daughters attend school.

Good education in Tajikistan is available at private schools. There are some good private schools, for which demand is high. Over the past 15 years, Tajik students have been the champions in regional and international school competitions. Basically, all the winners were from private schools and lyceums. Wages of teachers in these schools are high, the latest technologies are used and technical equipment is much better than in public schools. Of course, not all citizens of Tajikistan can afford to study at these institutions.

These private schools also have their problems and difficulties. For example, one of the most prestigious private high schools, “Hotham PV” was almost deprived of the building, since it is located in a former kindergarten. Management of this private school more than once
appealed to the Ministry to ask for another building, but the response has not yet been received.

According to the majority of respondents in Tajikistan, a good education can be obtained only if one invests good money in their children’s education. But the quality of universal education is poor.

Many graduates go Tajik schools enter universities of foreign countries. The Ministry of Education and Science has a quota to study in foreign universities, and currently about 13,137 Tajik students are studying in foreign universities, but the management of foreign universities often complaints about the level of training of Tajik students. So, a few years ago, local media reported that more than 50 Tajik students were not accepted in Kazakh universities, and five students were excluded because of poor training and low level of knowledge.

There is no information on how many students study abroad not through the Ministry’s quota.

Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusion that arises when analyzing the current situation in the education of the republic is the ineffective management in this area. The Ministry of Education and Science has completely monopolized the education in the country. Now no university or school cannot change the curriculum or solve some problem without permission from the above. The Ministry of Education for some unknown to public reasons often closed successful institutions in the country, which affected the students. In 2009, according to court decision on the appeal of the Ministry, the International Technology Innovation University was closed. During a short period, this university has become very popular, lectures were delivered by civil society activists and members of opposition parties. Many blamed its success and participation of political opponents in the educational process of the university in its closure.

Both parents who pay for their children’s education but do not get the desired effect and university professors, who complain that high school graduates’ knowledge is getting poorer every year, are unhappy with the quality of education.

All the efforts of the Ministry of Education and Science are not getting the appropriate return. It still must make a great effort to change the situation and to bring education to the proper level. The priority measures include higher wages for teachers and educators. In
addition, it is possible to use a different reward system, like in the Soviet Union, when teachers were exempt from taxation, received plots of land and soft loans for the purchase of property, etc. All informal payments in public schools should be cancelled. New technologies must be introduced into the curriculum of school education, in order to raise competitiveness of Tajik school graduates in other countries. And most importantly, the effectiveness of the Ministry itself should be improved, they should study the experience of other countries, such as Kazakhstan, where the level of education has increased significantly in recent years.

Humayro Bakhtiyor, journalist

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